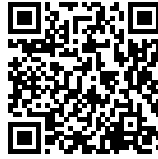




BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

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Our lives have been governed since March of this year by the Corona Virus. There has been no escaping its affect upon countries and communities all over the world. Some countries and people have been affected much more than others.

Many families sadly have experienced the death of a loved one, others are still unable to mix and socialise, people have lost their jobs and for many the future looks unstable and bleak. Generally speaking, this virus has not been for the benefit of human kind; the visible disadvantages far out way any possible advantages. Or at least that's the way it seems.

Some people including Christians believe that God has sent the Corona Virus as some sort of punishment for the sins of human kind. But if that was the case why now, what was the tipping point which prompted his action? Pornography, abortion, deforestation, child abuse, war, gulags, take your pick. God does not work like this because of his Son Jesus Christ. Nowhere in scripture do we find where Jesus sent plagues upon people because they did not honour or support his cause. Jesus is in the business of healing and restoring people.

There are dozens of accounts in the New Testament where Jesus healed the blind, the lame, the deaf, those who had demons within. Huge crowds laid the sick in front of him and begged him that they might touch the fringe of his cloak in order to be healed. He raised people from the dead. Jesus came into this world to seek and save the lost not get rid of them with plagues.

If the finger is to pointed at anyone, it should be towards the Devil. The master deceiver and liar who delights in chaos, disorder, social and moral breakdown and political turmoil. And this is what is happening in the USA. When these factors are being played out the devil is never far away. As the Apostle Paul calls him, "the prince of the power of the air." God is fully aware of the situation; of face masks, social distancing, fatalities, vaccines and everything else that we have now come to hear about. But God will as he always has in any global event continue to work his plans and purposes for our redemption.

How did the virus affect you and your family? Everyone has their own particular story to tell. For me being honest; it never really affected me or my family in any significant way.

We remained healthy and strong throughout and even at the very start of the lockdown around the middle of March we were still able to get out and about walking on the country rounds around our home.

In fact, it was a great way of getting to see and know the countryside taking in the sights, sounds and colours of God's handiwork. When you are on foot walking past hedgerows, streams, trees, fields of cattle, horses, and sheep it gives you a totally different dimension to that of zipping past in a motor car. You see things on foot that you would never see speeding past in a car.

Also, as a fairly keen gardener I was able to get out into our garden which is about half an acre in size. When we bought the bungalow, the garden was literally a jungle covered with bracken, gorse bushes, six-foot-high nettles and twenty-foot-long brambles that were an inch thick. A chain saw works wonders though.

Much of my time during the lock down, in fact nearly all of my time was spent in the garden clearing it, planting out over a hundred containers of plants that we brought with us from the manse, dredging a pond that resembled more of a swamp, sowed a wild flower meadow and seeded a lawn. I still have a small forest to plant up, and we have a small herd of alpaccas and three Labrador dogs plus grandchildren. So, during it all I managed to lose two stone in weight and got the muscles in my legs and arms working again the way they should.

As regards our family our two children were not key workers nor were, they connected to the Health Service Sector. Both of them who have IT jobs and our daughter in law were able to work from home. Life for them continued on much as normal but with the usual Government restrictions. I also avoided at all costs watching or listening to any news concerning the corona virus. The main news channels are the generators of fake news. The so-called facts and figures given out were and still are wholly inaccurate and at best misleading. Their main intention is to keep people in abject fear and suppress any granules of truth. Their cheery daily headlines usually begin with "Covid Related Deaths," whatever that means.

News avoidance helped my mental state enormously along with the therapeutic advantages of full-time gardening. I thoroughly recommend both for holistic well-being. On a different level how has the Corona Virus impacted you spiritually? One thing in particular which was quite difficult for me to deal with was being unable to attend church.

I missed not being able to attend church. I missed fellowship with others; I missed singing hymns and praise songs. I missed not shaking hands. I missed looking into people's faces and having eye contact; I missed having a cup of tea afterwards and a chat; I missed corporate prayer; I missed listening to and seeing the minister preach; I missed hearing the bible being read; I missed hearing the choir sing and musicians play; I missed the unity of Christian people; I missed being in God's house. On line services are fine, they are helpful and offer a substitute to the real thing but they can never replicate the real thing. As worshippers of the living God we are designed by God to meet together in fellowship; not meet in isolation.

That's what I missed most. The Sabbath Day became more or less another day of the week. I felt it did not have particular significance as a day to remember by keeping it holy. The fourth Commandment. One thing which happened for the vast majority of people Christian or non-Christian was that we were all in a different place physically and mentally. By that I mean some of us worked from home for the first time; some were furloughed; some lost their jobs, some remained at home. We shopped differently, our habits and lifestyles changed some more than others. And for many of us huge issues were at stake for the first time; our health, our finances, our sanity, our well-being.

In the book of Genesis ch 32 we read where Jacob was involved in a bizarre wrestling match with a divine being. There were huge issues at stake for him personally, and also regarding all our future destinies meaning yours and mine; through the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for future generations.

There were huge issues at stake for him and our destinies. It is a tight contest, in which Jacob's opponent's identity is obscure. The battle goes on throughout the night and even when Jacob is permanently injured with his hip being put out of joint, he holds on tight, unwilling to give up. All he could do, just like a wrestler on the ropes was to cling to his opponent for support.

What are we to make of all this very peculiar event? We are told first of all that Jacob was "left alone." Being alone is generally something we are not comfortable with. Yet often when it's just you on your own and God a very real intimacy takes place. Almost physical contact.

Jesus often choose to be on his own to pray to his Heavenly Father. David spent a lot of time on his own in the Judean desert as a young teenager and as a mature adult. The Apostle Paul, Isaiah, Moses, Elijah and many others all spent significant amounts of time on their own with God. They came back changed

people. There are fewer distractions, fewer clamouring for your attention when you are alone. Don't be afraid to be alone with God.

Sometimes we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place; and in Jacob's case it literally was. He had just ended a lengthy conflict-ridden relationship with his Uncle Laban. He was now staring in the face another potential conflict-ridden relationship with his brother Esau whom Jacob tricked out of his heritage. These were major relational issues for Jacob. He needed God's help above all else.

The former CEO of Ulster Rugby gave his testimony along with a few other Ulster rugby players in the Millennium Forum Londonderry a few years ago. He was from a non-believing background. After some lengthy intensive treatment, the doctors gave his young son less than a fifty-fifty chance of recovery. He was in utter turmoil until one day he saw the front door of a church open. He went inside and prayed for the first time in his life. He said, "God if you are there, help me."

That was it; two words; help me. "Help Me" is an excellent prayer to pray any time. "Help Me" discards any pretence. He was on his own with God and his life changed forever. Many months later not only did God heal his son but he himself received spiritual healing. When we are in a close personal situation with God things change. As the wrestling match continues Jacob in a position of physical weakness holds on tight to this divine person for a reason. What could it be?

Well, we are told, he tells the stranger, "I will not let you go, unless you Bless me." "Bless me," he says. Jacob knows he needs this above all else and despite the pain and discomfort, he will struggle for it.

Blessings are generally given by the greater to the lesser and Jacob recognises his inferiority and his desperate need for God's blessing on his life. God's blessing generally means to receive his good gifts; which may or may not include material blessings, and include spiritual blessings.

Those who are blessed are truly happy. Jesus said, "Blessed/happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed/happy are the pure in heart, for they will receive God. Blessed/happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

It's a good thing for us to be blessed by God and know it. It gives us confidence in our faith. When we bless God, we are giving him a gift; the gift of praise and thanksgiving. Our giving can never outdo God's giving, but we would do well to reflect on how much we take his blessings for granted and how much

we bless him for them. However, I fully understand some of us may find this easier to do than others depending on our circumstances. Sometimes life has been particularly cruel for some.

I think of the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn who wrote *The Gulag Archipelago* back in the late fifties which was published in 1973. The book recounts the factual testimonies of some 270 inmates of the camps. It highlights the sheer cruelty and wickedness of life inside the camps and what impact Communism had in Russia under Lenin and Stalin. Ironically it is encouraged to be read as a syllabus school book for students in Russia today, but banned in most English-speaking schools in the liberal west.

He fought on the Russian front against the Nazis in World War 2. In 1945 he was arrested and imprisoned by the communists under Joseph Stalin and sentenced to hard labour. Although much of his time was spent in solitary confinement for many years. The conditions in this prison camp the gulag in Siberia, were appalling.

After his release from prison he was diagnosed with cancer which had spread. He was eventually treated where his tumour went into remission. The Russian front in winter, a labour camp, exile, an attempted assassination by the KGB, and cancer. It doesn't come much worse. Yet with all he survived to the age of 89 years where he still sought God's blessing for his life as an Eastern Orthodox Christian. As we grow in our Christian faith and experience the blessings, he has for you, you cannot help but bless God. If your relationship with him is what it ought to be, then you will be praising him continuously.

The old hymn says; "When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed. When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost. Count your blessings, name them one by one. And it will surprise you what the Lord has done. Are you ever burdened with a load of care? Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear? Count your many blessings; every doubt will fly. And you will be singing as the days go by."

"May the Lord Bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

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The *image* shows Jacob Wrestling an Angel, by Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli (called, Il Morazzone), painted

ca. 1610.

